

## Book reviews

### **Open networks closed regimes: The impact of the Internet on authoritarian rule**

*Shanti Kalathil & Taylor C. Boas*

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As the proliferation of information and communication technologies (ICTs) has provided ample opportunities for new means of global communication, a majority of people have come to believe that the use of ICTs, and in particular the Internet, would break down national barriers of formerly closed regimes. However, although some authoritarian regimes have fallen during the rise of the Internet, a causal relationship between these two phenomena on the basis of detailed evidence has yet to be established. Discontent with this prevailing assumption of the Internet's inherent democratic nature, and its ascribed power to undermine authoritarian regimes, has led Shanti Kalathil and Taylor C. Boas to systematically assess the connection between Internet use and democratization.

The authors take on this challenge by examining the impact of the Internet on eight regimes, conceptualized as (semi-) authoritarian. The authors deploy a comprehensive analytical framework: For each country, the authors specify the ways in which a variety of Internet uses, by civil society, government, and businesses, may have political impact, and moreover situate these impacts within the respective national context of each country. To this extent, the authors assess state Internet policies and their basis in older traditional telecommunications regulatory regimes, as well as basic political, economic, and social dynamics in each country.

Although Kalathil and Boas employ a broad framework in an attempt to acknowledge the many complexities involved, they do not provide details on the specific factors they will

look for and, moreover, hardly use any references to other work in this area. This provides some uncertainties on the boundaries of their research and how this research relates to and builds on former studies. On the other hand, steering away from excessive detail on methodology keeps the book very accessible, with much potential beyond the academic audience.

The authors' in-depth examination of the cases, based on in-country interviews, secondary literature, and an examination of online materials, such as transcripts of chat room discourse, provide great insight into the wide variety of uses of Internet in these states and the differing impacts these uses of the Internet have had so far on authoritarian political control. With China and Cuba as the two central cases, the authors furthermore analyze the cases of Singapore, Vietnam, Burma, the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt.

Rejecting universal generalization among states, the authors choose an interesting variety of cases, the descriptions of which clearly make the point as to why generalization is impossible. The authors persuasively show that each country has its own unique idiosyncratic context, which needs serious consideration if we try to understand how regimes will develop and how policies could be implemented to further direct this development.

The evidence revealed by the cases supports the argument that the Internet is not necessarily a threat to (semi-) authoritarian regimes. Although the authors find that certain types of Internet use do indeed pose political challenges to authoritarian governments and that Internet use could furthermore contribute to political change in the future, they also find that at the same time, other uses of the Internet can actually reinforce authoritarian rule. Many authoritarian regimes use the development of the Internet in their respective nations in ways that serve their states' interests.

Throughout the book, Kalathil and Boas provide great insight on the varying ways in which Internet use may impact political regimes and vice versa. Their inquiry into the Internet's impacts beyond the commonly expressed idea of the Internet's inherent democratizing power adds great value to the already existing body of literature on societal and global impacts of the Internet. The book furthermore provides a useful follow-up on prior studies concerned with traditional mass communication and its impacts on political regimes: Kalathil and Boas do not only extend the discussion to the realm of the Internet but also frame many of the issues formerly treated separately as a comprehensive discussion.

Though not all findings are completely new, the added value of this book lies in the authors' provision of an extensive framework and additional multicase analyses that entail a wide variety of facets underlying the impact of Internet use on political systems. This provides us with insight into the ambiguity of long-term development concerning authoritarian control and wider Internet proliferation.

Although in the last part of the book the authors touch upon some important aspects of transformation of authoritarian regimes toward democracy, a discussion of the actual potential and need of democracy in the various countries was missing in our opinion. The authors seem to advocate democratization of authoritarian regimes in general. However, democracy—even though desirable from a normative point of view—is not a static concept manifested in a similar way across democracies throughout the world. The authors' indication of the positive trends by some of the authoritarian governments to deploy the Internet in order to increase transparency, reduce corruption, and make government more responsive to citizen's needs makes us wonder whether an enhanced push for democratic transition is desirable. At the end, democratization is typically not a smooth process; it carries the potential for destabilization and other undesirable consequences.

Hence, while the authors express the need to be careful in making transition policies, by having limited their discussion to transition issues themselves, they fail to engage important issues such as timing and "readiness" that would precipitate such transition. Part of this limitation stems from the authors not specifically discussing how they conceptualize authoritarian and semiauthoritarian regimes. This would have facilitated the formulation of actual differences with democracy plus the authors' normative perceptions of what regimes and political organization should optimally look like and the values they should reflect. In the end, this would spur a more focused discussion of how changes in particular policies could make a desirable impact.

To conclude, we highly recommend the book to anyone concerned with globalization, democratization, and the role of the Internet in these processes. The case studies in themselves provide great insight into differing political systems and how ICTs may impact evolving political structures and how political structures determine the specific value ICTs bring to society. As the Internet is still perceived by many as a means of liberation, the authors provide clear evidence that the Internet—as any other technology—is just a tool whose value is determined by its human context. The book is valuable for policy makers and academics interested in understanding and promoting information technology and its effects on democratization and regime change.

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